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‘You got your history, I got mine’

Some reflections on truth and objectivity in history*

Although Henry Ford only needed a one-liner to express a sceptical view about history („History is bunk“), since the 1980ies the critique of history has turned into a booming intellectual industry. Since the international rise of post-modernism volume-length doubts have been raised concerning history that is more than just subjective. The idea that history has little to do with the past, but much to do with the present and with power, has gained a remarkable popularity, so there are good reasons for taking seriously the rising tide of scepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge.¹

* I would like to thank Allan Megill (University of Virginia), Christoph Conrad (Centre for Comparative History of Europe, Berlin) and Tannelie Blom (University of Maastricht) for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

1 See, for instance, the new journal *Rethinking History* (first issue spring 1997), edited by Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow, and the volumes in the Routledge series ‚History and theory‘. By post-modernism I refer to intellectual positions that combine two fundamental ideas: 1. the „incredulity towards meta-narratives“ of history (Lyotard), such as Marxism, liberalism and modernism. This amounts to a rejection of all material philosophy of history and to a fundamental rejection of reducing any plurality to a unity, i. e., anti-reductionism and anti-unitarism; 2. the rejection of the idea that there is a reality independent of subject-positions, that is: anti-objectivism. Anti-objectivism results in a rejection of the discussion of reality independent of its symbolic representations, especially its linguistic representations. All the relevant ideas have been developed independently by a wide range of modern thinkers, only their post-modern combination is original. Therefore Wolfgang Iser’s proposal to view postmodernism as a recent and radical form of modernism makes sense. The same goes for his proposal to distinguish between the vulgar and the interesting variants of postmodern thought. Alas, in history we often encounter the vulgar variant. See: Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Berlin 1997, 1–8. See also the editors’ introduction to: Christoph Conrad and Martina Kessel (eds.), *Geschichte schreiben in der Postmoderne. Beiträge zur aktuellen Diskussion*, Stuttgart 1994, 9–36, and the special issue „Klions Texte“ of the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 4 (1993), Nr. 3. For a compilation of articles concerning the debate on postmodernism and history, see also: Keith Jenkins, ed., *The postmodern history reader*, London 1997. Jenkins himself, as I shall argue, represents ‚vulgar‘ postmodernism in Iser’s terminology.

What I shall do in this article is to present a defence of history against some widespread forms of postmodern scepticism.² My defence of history will deal with three (interrelated) arguments, which are used frequently in postmodern debates to cast doubts on the possibility of writing history. The first argument questions the possibility of truth in history. The second raises objections to the possibility of objectivity in history. And the third and last sceptical argument questions the possibility of writing history in a non-instrumental and non-legitimizing way.

The first sceptical argument casts doubts on the possibility that historians can write true accounts of the past. This argument usually rests on the observation that all historical accounts are framed in language and on the argument that there is always a gap between the linguistic representation of reality and reality itself. In essence, this argument boils down to the thesis that it is impossible in principle to represent historical reality truthfully in language. Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Hayden White have developed arguments to that effect, although their analyses of historiography are highly complex and certainly cannot be reduced to these arguments alone.³

The second sceptical argument questions the principal possibility for historians to write objective accounts of the past. This sceptical argument must be distinguished from the first, because the possibility of a true account of the past is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the possibility of an objective account. For example, one might admit the possibility of true accounts of the past, but at the same time deny the possibility of adequate or objective accounts.

From the denial of objectivity it is usually only a short step towards embracing relativism in all forms. It therefore comes as no surprise that such is also the case with postmodernist denials of objectivity, although the postmodern arguments actually differ from the classical relativist ones. In classical relativism, the impossibility of objective representation is usually founded on the thesis that historians as persons are necessarily ‚standortgebunden‘, selective, prejudiced, perspectival, involved, partisan, and the like. In post-modern relativism, however, the impossibility of objective representation is usually based on the thesis that the language – or interpretation – of the historian precludes

2 Cf. Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history*, London 1997; Keith Windschuttle, *The killing of history. How literary critics and social theorists are murdering our past*, New York 1997; C. Behan McCullagh, *The truth of history*, London and New York 1998; Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit*, Köln, Weimar and Wien 1997.

3 On White see Chris Lorenz, *Can histories be true? Narrativism, positivism and the „metaphorical turn“*, in: *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 309–329, and Herta Nagl-Docekal, *Lässt sich die Geschichtsphilosophie tropologisch fundieren? Kritische Anmerkungen zu Hayden White*, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 4 (1993), 466–476. See also Michel de Certeau, *The writing of history*, New York 1988. On Foucault, see below.

any possibility of objectivity.⁴ Postmodern relativists thus shift the focus from the person of the historian to the language of the historian; the focus is shifted from the representing subject to the language of representation.

This second sceptical argument, which denies the possibility of objectivity, is only one short step from the third argument, which claims the instrumentality and the legitimizing function of all history. The basic idea is that if history cannot be objective, it must be instrumental. And if history cannot be universal and neutral, it must be subservient to some particular interest (an argument commonly found in the sociology of knowledge).

I shall now deal in turn with the three arguments which are used in questioning the status and legitimacy of history writing as such.

1. Can histories be true?

I shall begin by analysing the argument which states that it is impossible for historians to give a true account of past reality. This argument is often borrowed from two famous thinkers who originally developed this train of thought.⁵ According to Hayden White (whose intellectual origins lie in structuralism) historians do not present true accounts of the past, but „fictions of factual representation“ which are akin to literary accounts. For Michel Foucault, whatever truth a historical account may claim is the product of a specific ‚discourse‘ with its own ‚politics of truth‘ and ‚regime of truth‘. Therefore, truth is not constituted by the correspondence between language and reality, but is a socio-political construct, dependent on a specific ‚regime of truth‘ and characterized by specific power relations. Authors who use this sceptical argument thus tend to put the terms ‚reality‘, ‚fact‘ and ‚truth‘ in italics or between quotation marks.⁶

All these authors emphasize that knowledge of reality presupposes some kind of linguistic construction, because the concepts, statements, and stories in which our knowledge of reality is formulated, are not found in reality itself; they first have to be constructed. Even the past is not found as such and has to be conceptually constructed. Reality as represented, and as known, is

4 For this reason I reject Ankersmit's distinction between a vocabulary of representation and of interpretation, because all representations are interpretations. I agree with Gadamer's claim that all knowledge involves interpretation. See Frank R. Ankersmit, *History and tropology. The rise and fall of metaphor*, Berkeley 1994, 97–125.

5 This is not the place to evaluate the work of these important thinkers in toto nor to place their arguments in their precise context. Many of their formulations can plausibly be read as conscious provocations.

6 See Keith Jenkins, Introduction, in: Idem, ed., *Postmodern History Reader*, as footnote 1, 1–36, esp. 5, where he refers to „the residues of old ‚certaintist‘ modernisms“ (objectivity, disinterestedness, the facts, truth) and proposes to change them into their postmodern (‚postist‘) ‚equivalents‘ such as „readings, positions, reality effects, truth effects“.

therefore always a conceptually constructed reality or, to use a postmodern term, a product of ‚discourse‘.

To this valid and important insight – which incidentally had already been developed by modern epistemology – many post-modernists give a special twist, which leads to their sceptical position. This is the point at which they part company with all realists and constructivists of a non-sceptical persuasion. According to their arguments, realistic representation is impossible: when one uses linguistic constructs to represent reality, one at the same time ‚fictionalizes‘ reality, i. e. one transforms the representation into some kind of ‚fiction‘.⁷ This argument is usually based on the correct observation that during the process of linguistic representation something is ‚added‘ to reality, namely, the linguistic instruments used to represent it. For example when I watch an appalling football game between Belgium and Holland and give an account of it by writing: „The football match between the Red Devils and the Orange Lions looked like a bloodthirsty war“, I am ‚adding‘ linguistic characteristics to the representation of the football match that were not present as such in reality. Literally speaking, there were of course no red devils nor orange lions in the stadium and neither was there a bloodthirsty war. I have merely added some imaginative metaphors to my description of reality, just as writers of fiction do.

According to the post-modern argument, this is exactly what happens in all history writing: historians ‚add‘ to their accounts of past reality linguistic instruments, such as metaphors and plot structures, that were not present in the past itself. According to Hayden White and his pupils, historians can therefore be said to fictionalize the past, and history writing is basically an „extended metaphor“ and „the fiction of factual representation“. Remarkably, several authors who have advocated the ‚return of narrative‘ to (the philosophy of) history, have at the same time destroyed the epistemological credentials of narrative.

Thus, sceptical postmodernists argue that linguistic construction in history necessarily generates some kind of representational inadequacy. They also argue that, as a consequence of this inadequacy, realistic representations acquire a fictional element. Their conclusion is that, because of this fictional element, the traditional idea of truth is no longer valid for realistic representations. This conclusion follows logically from the initial premisses of the postmodern argument because truth basically means correspondence between reality and the representation of reality in language; or, in other words, adequate represen-

7 What is meant by the term ‚fiction‘ is the crucial issue. See Ann Rigney, *Semantic slides: history and the concept of fiction*, in: Rolf Thorstendahl and Irmline Veit-Brause (eds.), *History-making: the intellectual and social formation of a discipline*, Stockholm 1996, 31–47. Authors who have introduced the term recently into historical discourse – especially White and de Certeau – all contrast ‚fiction‘ to ‚factuality‘. For White’s (shifting) positions on this issue see Lorenz, *Can histories*, as footnote 3, esp. 319.

tation. It will be obvious that, by its very definition, fiction cannot correspond to reality. (How correspondence and adequacy are defined is, of course, altogether another matter.⁸)

Post-modernists of this kind argue that, due to the radical difference and the unbridgeable gap between language and reality, it is impossible to represent reality in language in a truthful manner.⁹ Instead of true accounts of the past, authors like White, Barthes, de Certeau and Foucault, speak of ‚ideological‘, ‚mythical‘, ‚fictional‘ or ‚imaginative‘ accounts of the past. When truth is declared dead in post-modernism, only ‚its other‘ – myth, fiction, ideology – remains.¹⁰

This is a remarkably sceptical argument and in order to evaluate it more

8 Since Wittgenstein's later work, it has become obvious that correspondence cannot be interpreted as a simple relationship between language and uninterpreted reality. The correspondence relation can only be conceived of as a – constructed – relation within the linguistic framework, in which reality is described. My point is, therefore, that constructing is not identical to fictionalizing, but a legitimate and necessary cognitive activity. See Chris Lorenz, *Historical knowledge and historical reality. A plea for ‚internal realism‘*, in: Brian Fay et al. (eds.), *History and Theory. Contemporary readings*, Oxford 1998, 342–377. See also Martin Bunzl, *Real history. Reflections on historical practice*, London and New York 1997, 77: „To speak of the categories of experience as constructed is not to say that we cannot ask questions about the circumstances of that construction. Nor that we cannot answer these questions in terms about which there is no fact of the matter.“ For Wittgenstein's notion of truth see: Matthias Kross, *Klarheit statt Wahrheit. Evidenz und Gewißheit bei Ludwig Wittgenstein*, in: Matthias Kross and Gary Smith (eds.), *Die ungewisse Evidenz. Für eine Kulturgeschichte des Beweises*, Berlin 1998, 95–139.

9 Some – like Foucault – defend this idea for all types of linguistic constructs, from statements to stories. Others, such as White and Ankersmit, only defend this idea for more complex linguistic constructs, like complete stories, and exempt singular statements.

10 This line of argument is exemplified by Michel de Certeau, who invokes the authority of Roland Barthes. Although he defines historiography as a relation between the real and discourse which is controlled by methodical operations, at the same time he opposes ‚the real‘ to its historiographical representations and characterizes the products of historiographical discourse as ‚fictional‘ and ‚ideological‘. See de Certeau, *Writing*, as footnote 3, 75, where he refers to „an ideology of ‚real‘ or ‚true‘ historical ‚facts‘“ in history. At the same time, he uncouples meaning from reality and couples meaning to the construction of models; *ibidem*, 79: „Research ascribes objects for itself that take the shape of its practice“; *ibidem*, 81: „The relation with the real becomes a relation among the terms of an operation“. „The objects that he (Braudel, CL) proposed for research were determined in relation to an operation to be undertaken (not a reality to be rejoined), and in respect to existing models. A result of this enterprise, the ‚fact‘ is the designation of a relation“. Hence, 41–42: „Historians are those who assemble not so much facts as signifiers. They seem to tell of facts while, in effect, they express meanings which moreover refer what is noted (what historians hold to be relevant) to a conception of whatever is notable. The signified of historical discourse is made from ideological or imaginary structures; but they are effected by a referent outside of the discourse that is inaccessible in itself“. Cf. *ibidem*, 10: „Thus the past is the fiction of the present“. A similar line of argument is defended by Jenkins, *Introduction*, as footnote 6, who also identifies all ‚constructive‘ activity as non-cognitive and therefore as ‚ideological‘ and ‚interested‘. For a far more illuminating analysis of the ‚constructive‘ dimensions of

precisely, we will have to look at the role played in history by metaphor and metaphorical statement, such as the ones I have used to describe the football match between Belgium and Holland. We have seen that authors like White and de Certeau hold that the use of metaphor by historians entails the introduction of fictional and imaginative characteristics into their representation of reality. White therefore refers to history as the „fiction of factual representation“ and he characterizes historical narratives as „extended metaphors“.

Plausible as this argument may seem, on closer analysis it can easily be refuted because it denies the metaphorical dimension of all language, including descriptive language. Indeed, one could argue that our language is replete with metaphors which are no longer recognized as such. All natural language can be regarded as a reservoir of metaphors, dead and alive. In other words, we are speaking metaphorically all the time. For example, when I describe ‚the mouth of a river‘ or ‚the neck of a bottle‘, or say ‚that conference was a nightmare‘, I am using metaphorical language knowingly or unknowingly¹¹ (and *only* Monty Python’s John Cleese presents a real nutshell while ‚putting an argument in a nutshell‘). For most of us, the metaphorical dimension of language would not be a good enough reason for holding that it is impossible to give a truthful description of the mouth of a river, the neck of a bottle or a ‚nightmare conference‘. Without the presupposition that this type of metaphorical statement can be true or untrue, it seems impossible to make sense of the distinction between (true) descriptions and (untrue) misdescriptions of the world. Thus, postmodernist sceptics also have to be sceptical about this distinction, which would appear to be fundamental for (successfully) coping with the world. Furthermore, scepticism must explain the difference between successful and unsuccessful representations of the world without harking back to some notion of truth. To date, however, no arguments to that effect have been presented.

Claiming truth for a representation (of, say a football match) basically means claiming that the representation corresponds to reality and that one is prepared to back up this ‚reality-claim‘ with arguments. Given that I recognize that reality-claims, as is the case with all claims to knowledge, have to be argued for, it follows that I am prepared to revise or eventually drop my truth-claim when confronted with valid counter-arguments.

This willingness is presupposed by all who enter into a rational discussion,

language and its relation to the referential dimensions see: Charles Taylor, *Human agency and language*. Philosophical papers, Vol. 1, Cambridge 1985, 213–293.

¹¹ I subscribe to Mary Hesse’s theory of metaphor. Hesse analyses the distinction between literal and metaphorical language as an analogue of the distinction between observational and theoretical language in (the philosophy of) science. See Mary Hesse, *Models, metaphor and truth*, in: Frank R. Ankersmit and Jan J. Mooij, (eds.), *Knowledge and language*, vol. 3: *Metaphor and knowledge*, Dordrecht, Boston and London 1993, 50–67. A similar position is developed by McCullagh, *Truth*, as footnote 2, 75–82.

because the exchange of arguments is otherwise meaningless. The fact that postmodern sceptics too have staged discussions with their opponents and have put forward their views in the form of arguments, illustrates my (Habermasian) point. In conclusion, therefore, the willingness to back up, revise and eventually drop reality-claims on the basis of arguments is not culturally or ideologically determined, as some postmodernist and postcolonial theorists try to argue, but is actually an integral part of what it means to argue and to be rational in a universal sense.¹²

This leads me to my final set of reservations about the sceptical argument. These are of a conceptual nature, because notions like fiction, myth and ideology only make sense if they contrast with something such as fact, science and truth. All these concepts derive their meaning from their opposites and therefore presuppose each other, just as the notion of a liar only makes sense in contrast to people who do not lie, i. e. who speak the truth. If everything is fictional and mythical, fiction and myth become all-encompassing and ultimately empty categories. If all life is a football match, there is no longer any possibility playing a proper match of football, since we are all playing football all of the time.¹³ Remarkably, some postmodernists who advocate the search for 'conceptual opposites' and 'exclusions' remain utterly blind to the fact that any theory of ideology which conceptually excludes its opposite of true knowledge, is empty and incoherent. The crucial fact that reality does not dictate or determine how it is linguistically represented, does not preclude the possibility of multiple true representations. This, incidentally, is the message of 'practical realism' or 'internal realism'¹⁴.)

How does my argument relate to the possibility of true representations in history? For historians, it is important to note that what I have argued with respect to truthful representation is independent of the dimension of time: it holds as true for the present, as it does for the future or the past. In short, it makes no difference whether we refer to events registered today, yesterday, in

12 One of the most disturbing features of some forms of postmodernism is the tendency to question both argument and rationality as such and to criticize them as 'interested', 'ideological', 'culturally specific to the West' and 'oppressive'. See for instance Jenkins, Introduction, as footnote 6, who discredits the empirical arguments of 'academic' history as 'bourgeois' and thus 'ideological'. Cf. also Ghandi on postcolonial theory, below.

13 The great intellectual masters of suspicion, Marx and Nietzsche, were themselves aware of the self-destructive potential of their all-encompassing theories of ideology. Unfortunately, it seems that these lessons in this respect have been forgotten by the majority of those who posture as their (post)modern pupils. For Marx and Nietzsche on truth see: Hans Barth, *Wahrheit und Ideologie*, Frankfurt am Main 1974 (1961).

14 The terms were coined by Hillary Putnam, *What is realism?*, in: Jarrett Leplin, ed., *Scientific realism*, Berkeley 1984, 140–154. For its application to history see Lorenz, *Historical knowledge*, as footnote 8, and Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the truth about history*, New York 1994, 247–251.

the last century, or in the next century. I emphasize the indifference of concepts of truthful representation to the dimension of time, because many sceptics have argued that the unobservability of the past creates special epistemological problems for history.¹⁵ Michel de Certeau certainly got that wrong.¹⁶

2. Can histories be objective?

Postmodernists who defend a relativist position usually employ two sorts of arguments for the thesis that history cannot be objective:

1. They argue that all forms of conception – including conceptions of science and of epistemology – are conditioned by, and are relative to, particular cultures. This argument is also known as ethnocentrism.

2. They use a closely related argument, according to which all ‚production of knowledge‘ is conditioned by – and relative to – particular ‚politics of knowledge‘ or ‚truth regimes‘.

These two arguments are interrelated. Both posit that knowledge, and thus truth, can never claim to be universally valid, because both knowledge and truth are always connected to particular circumstances or interests of some sort, such as culture, class or gender. Both arguments thus regard all universal claims to knowledge and truth as ideological, because any claim to universal validity can only be a smokescreen hiding particular interests. In short, what

¹⁵ For a discussion of this problem and further references see Lorenz, *Konstruktion*, as footnote 2, chapter 2 and 3.

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau invokes Popper's authority, but he seems to miss Popper's main point. For Popper, the fact that scientists can never prove the truth of their statements empirically does not imply that these statements do not claim to be true. On the contrary, the whole point of science according to Popper's theory of verisimilitude is that scientific statements constantly try to get closer to the truth. The only point of falsification is to assure that ‚false‘ candidates for truth are eliminated. Without the quest for truth, falsification would make no sense, just as the exposure of lies would make no sense without the idea of truth. See Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: discourses on the other*, Minneapolis and London 1986, 200–201: „Not that it [historiography] speaks the truth; never has the historian pretended to do that! Rather, with its apparatus for the critical reading of documents, the scholar effaces error from the ‚fables‘ of the past. The territory that he occupies is acquired by a diagnosis of the false“ (...). „His work is oriented to the negative, or, to borrow a more appropriate term from Popper, towards ‚falsification‘“. „(...) in the past, arguments against „false“ gods were used to induce belief in a true God. The process repeats itself today in contemporary historiography: by demonstrating the presence of errors, discourse must pass off as ‚real‘ whatever is placed in opposition to errors.“ A similar line of argument is found in Jenkins, *Introduction*, as footnote 6, 6, according to whom the absence of ‚certain foundations‘ nullifies the quest for truth and turns all our cognitive activities into ‚positioned expressions‘: „In fact (sic! CL), history now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions.“ Cf. Thomas Haskell's review of Berkhofer in: ‚Farewell to fallibilism‘.

the two arguments have in common is that they deny the possibility of a true universality and generality of values. This type of argument was first presented by Nietzsche, but more recently it has been developed by Michel Foucault and others¹⁷. Although the two are interrelated, I will first deal with the argument of ethnocentrism and then with the argument concerning the 'politics of knowledge'.

2a. Ethnocentrism

The postmodernist critique of objectivity and postmodernism's cult of diversity, particularity and heterogeneity is often related to the advent of multiculturalism. The basic point of ethnocentrism – as well as its problems – can be illustrated by an incident that was reported by North-Californian newspapers in the summer of 1994. The incident revolved around an Indian man (alias a native American or Amerindian), who was arrested and tried for shooting several legally protected eagles with a machine-gun. The Indian refused to acknowledge that he was guilty of breaching 'the law' because, as he said, according to Indian law, there was nothing wrong with shooting eagles, since Indians, as is well known, need eagle feathers to fabricate their traditional outfit. U.S. law, in his view, was an instrument to oppress Indians and to prevent them from living traditional Indian lives. In summary, this Indian citizen of the U.S. denied the universality of U.S. law by appealing to particular Indian law and rejected universal U.S. law as an instrument of Indian-repression.¹⁸ Note, however, that this Indian did not reject the use of universal U.S. gun technology.

This incident is a good illustration of the postcolonial critique of 'Western' conceptions of objectivity and epistemology, because ethnocentrism basically extends the 'Indian argument' from the domain of culture and law to the domain of science and epistemology. Just as our Indian eagle hunter told the U.S. judge and jury, 'Your conception of law and culture is not mine', postcolonial theory tells 'The West': 'Your conception of science and knowledge is not the same as the conceptions of non-Westerners'. Since postmodernism holds, as we saw earlier, that all conceptions of reality are linguistic and cultural constructs, this argument amounts to the thesis 'Your reality is not the same as mine'. Therefore, according to postmodernism, different cultures deal with different conceptions of reality.

How can we deal with this postmodern argument? To begin with, we can

17 Kross rightly criticizes the Nietzschean argument in this context for introducing (the will to) power as an 'unmoved mover'. See Kross, Klarheit, as footnote 8, 95–100.

18 In this specific instance, the Amerindian was – historically speaking – not completely off the track, because native Americans only became U.S. citizens and subjects to U.S. law in 1924.

say that the postmodern argument raises the crucial problem of multiperspectivity and the problem of whether (and how) one can understand people from other cultures. However, as was the case with the possibility of truthful representation, I think the postmodern argument against the possibility of – universal – objectivity has grossly overstated its case. I shall now try to analyse where this postmodern argument has gone wrong and I shall do so by dealing with the ethnocentric arguments from the perspective of modern theories of interpretation.¹⁹

According to ethnocentrism, we can only interpret the world from ‚our‘ own point of view, because that is the only point of view we have. Moreover, because we are all products of specific cultures, our points of view are ‚trapped‘ in those cultures. Therefore, interpretation is inevitably ethnocentric and it is impossible to understand others as they understand themselves; we can only ever understand them according to „our own lights“²⁰.

The general idea behind ethnocentrism, namely that people’s conceptions and ideas are somehow conditioned by their culture, seems to be a sound one, although by no means brand new. The crucial question related to this idea is, what exactly is meant by this ‚conditioning‘ of interpretations by cultures? What is implied when one states that a person’s ideas and interpretations are ‚conditioned‘ by his or her culture?

As long as ‚conditioning‘ is taken to mean ‚enabling‘, the ethnocentric idea provides valid and important insight that is supported by modern theories of interpretation. As soon as it is recognized that all knowledge is mediated by language, interpretation advances to the centre of the epistemological stage because (natural) languages necessarily require interpretation.

In modern theories of interpretation there is broad consensus about three characteristics of interpretation, which show a superficial ‚family resemblance‘ to the ethnocentric view.

1. Interpretation is a holistic and circular process, which means that all interpretation requires a projection of meaning of the interpreted object (a ‚Sinn-Entwurf‘ and a ‚Vorgriff auf das Ganze‘, to use Gadamer’s terms) from which the interpreter starts interpreting.²¹

2. Interpretation requires a stock of tacit knowledge or a tradition, from which the interpreter can derive projections of meaning, alias his or her interpretative ‚pre-judgements‘ (Vor-Urteile). The interpretation of culture is not possible in a context devoid of meaning, because an initial hunch about the meaning of what is to be interpreted is necessary before the work of inter-

19 My argument in case is based on James Bohman, *New philosophy of social science. Problems of indeterminacy*, Oxford 1991, 112–124.

20 Ibidem, 113.

21 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 3rd. enlarged ed., Tübingen 1972.

pretation can be started. This hunch is the ‚ignition‘ for every interpretative ‚take-off‘. In this respect interpretation can never be objective – in the sense of lacking presuppositions – and interpretation always remains embedded in the tradition from which the hunches are originally derived, just as ethnocentrism posits. Thus, interpretation is always a reciprocal process between interpreter and interpretandum, aptly described by Gadamer as a fusion of two horizons („Horizontverschmelzung“).

3. Interpretation is always

- a) partial – there can be no complete interpretation of anything,
- b) perspectival – all interpretation is interpretation from a particular point of view ‚embedded‘ within a particular tradition – and
- c) revisable – all interpretation is open to later revisions.

Once these points have been accepted, it is easy to see – with Gadamer – why the process of interpretation will never come to an end and why it is difficult to say on what grounds one interpretation should be preferable to another.

On closer analysis, the postmodern and ethnocentric attack on the idea of objectivity can be seen as a radicalization of modern theories of interpretation. The first two characteristics of interpretation – its holistic character and the necessity of a tradition, from which the interpreter can derive his/her horizon of presuppositions and expectations – are transformed in ethnocentrism from enabling into limiting conditions of interpretation, to use James Bohman’s terminology. By this I mean that ethnocentrism not only holds that traditions enable individuals to develop interpretations, but also that they embody particular limits that cannot be transcended. The enabling conditions of cultural traditions are thus imperceptibly transformed into conceptual limits or prisons; once socialized into a cultural tradition, individuals are imprisoned by it for life. To stick to this metaphor implies that, culturally speaking, according to ethnocentrism we are all serving life sentences.

A similar radicalization can be observed in relation to the third characteristic of interpretation, namely its perspectivity, and consequently, its partiality and revisability. Perspectives deriving from cultural traditions are also radicalized by ethnocentrism from enabling into limiting conditions of interpretation: once you have acquired a perspective, you cannot escape or transcend it. It is impossible, therefore, to say that one perspective is to be preferred over another, because such a judgement presupposes a meta-perspective, from which particular perspectives can be judged. The valid argument that nowhere provides an ‚objective‘ view is thus radicalized into a relativistic praise of the view from anywhere. One perspective is just as good as another.

It then comes as no surprise that the last characteristic of interpretation, its permanent revisability, is also radicalized in a sceptical direction. If it is

possible to revise interpretations continually, it is senseless to make comparative quality judgements, because all such judgements will soon be blown away by the winds of time. Hence the sceptical attitude is the only sound one, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

In analysing the ethnocentric position as a radicalization of modern theories of interpretation, I have already indicated its main problems. Its major problem lies in the unwarranted transformation of the enabling conditions of interpretation into the limiting conditions of interpretation. In the first place, this transformation is unwarranted because the empirical problems we face in trying to transcend cultural horizons or perspectives cannot be transformed into logical problems without further (transcendental) proof. The empirical fact that you or I may have practical problems in understanding the point of view of an Indian eagle hunter who machine-gunned protected eagles, does not logically entail the impossibility of people like us, i. e. 'Westerners', understanding Indians in an 'objective' way. Ethnocentrism, however, transforms empirical difficulties in interpreting 'other cultures' into logical impossibilities. It is obvious that this step does not constitute a valid argument.

Secondly, this transformation is unwarranted because the empirical variability of interpretation through time – alias its time index – does not logically entail the conclusion that interpretation changes through time in an arbitrary way. The fact that interpretations do change through time does not imply that the process of interpretation is not guided by evidence, nor that the evolution of interpretations is not guided by intersubjective epistemological criteria, such as coherence and correctness.²² The development and selection of better interpretations over the years means progress in the long run, and since Popper we know that progress in the relative quality of knowledge constitutes all the 'objectivity' that there is to be had – both in the natural and in the human sciences.²³

To sum up: the sceptical argument against the possibility of 'objective' representation in history does not stand up to critical analysis, because ethnocentrism fails to adduce the necessary arguments to prove that the empirical problems involved in trying to transcend and widen our cultural horizons, and thus achieve (relative) 'objectivity', are of a logical nature. Besides this problem, ethnocentrism suffers from the same defect as all other relativist posi-

22 See, for instance, Raymond Martin, Progress in historical studies, in: *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 14–40. This does not, of course, imply that these norms are unequivocal and function like an algorithm. They too require interpretation, which in turn explains why there is no guarantee for consensus.

23 Hence there is no need to presuppose 'instant rationality' (Imre Lakatos) in order to defend the notion of 'objectivity'. For this notion of objectivity see for example: Mark Bevir, Objectivity in history, in: *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 3, 328–345, and Thomas Haskell, Objectivity is not neutrality. Explanatory schemes in history, Baltimore 1998.

tions, since the relativist argument also applies to itself: if all is relative, this also holds true for relativism. Relativists are unable to provide arguments in favour of relativism without embracing a non-relativist argument, i. e. without undermining their own position. Relativism is therefore ultimately incoherent.

2b. The politics of truth

One fruitful way to interpret Foucault's conception of power/knowledge is to interpret his theory as a critique of the Enlightenment tradition, as Charles Taylor has proposed. Taylor argues convincingly that Foucault's theory of science and knowledge can be read as an inversion of the Enlightenment dogma that 'knowledge liberates'.²⁴ Instead of the Enlightenment idea of a liberating truth, Foucault presents the idea of a dominating truth, i. e. a truth which produces power, constitutes a vehicle of power and is engaged in a permanent struggle. The master metaphor of Foucault's theory of knowledge is the metaphor of war: „I believe that one's point of reference should not be the great model of language (langage) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning.“²⁵ This, according to Foucault, has consequences for the concept of truth: „Truth isn't outside power, or lacking power (...). Truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world. It is produced only in virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.“²⁶

In Foucault's view, therefore, the idea of a liberating truth is a profound illusion. There is no truth which can be rescued from systems of power, because every such system defines its own variant of truth. Nor is there any escape from power into freedom, for such systems of power are coextensive with human society. We can only step from one to another.²⁷

If we try to understand what Foucault means by 'regimes' and 'politics of truth' which vary with societies, it is necessary to link these notions to his analyses of the modern human sciences, because his theory of knowledge is directly connected to his theory of society. To cut a long and complicated

24 Charles Taylor, Foucault on freedom and truth, in: *Philosophy and the human sciences. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Cambridge 1985, 152–153.

25 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, Brighton 1980, 114.

26 *Ibidem*, 131.

27 See Taylor, Foucault, as footnote 24, 152–153.

(his)story short, in Foucault's vision, the rise of the modern human sciences is part of the rise of modern 'disciplinary society'. According to Foucault, the rise of modern individuality – the modern identity of man as an individual – is part of this development and the modern human sciences have constructed and sustained this type of identity ever since. By defining modern man as an individual with an inner identity, the modern human sciences have transformed modern man into an object of 'scientific' control and normalization; the specificity of their functioning is that their control is anchored in the very identities they construct.

Although the idea of the instrumental rationality of modern science was far from new, Foucault's elaborations of it proved extraordinarily inspirational and have made him one of the most influential thinkers of our time.²⁸ Yet, Foucault's elaboration of the relationship between knowledge or truth, and power, is at the same time extremely one-sided.²⁹ His reversal of Clausewitz' famous aphorism, which makes us see politics as war carried out by other means,³⁰ and its application to the human sciences, has certainly opened insights into its repressive aspects. The theory suffers, however, from the same defects as the Enlightenment position which Foucault reverses with Clausewitz's help (as is always the case with reversals in the history of ideas). Foucault totalizes one aspect of a specific species of knowledge production into the general characteristic of the genus knowledge production. In doing so, he transforms an empirical aspect of knowledge – its repressive potential – into its logical attribute. In order to make such a move plausible, Foucault would need a transcendental argument, which would prove a necessary, conceptual connection between knowledge and power (just as ethnocentrism lacks a transcendental argument which proving a necessary connection between perspectives and the impossibility of transcending them). However, this transcendental proof is missing and we are merely confronted with a bold and interesting theory in need of empirical corroboration.

In the end, Foucault's theory of power, which denies any possibility of freeing oneself from power, is incoherent, for the same reasons that I put forward earlier in relation to the postmodern denial of the possibility of truthful representation: if power is everywhere, and if all social relations are relations of domination and subjugation, then all social relations are relations of power

28 The critique of instrumental rationality has, as is well known, been the major theme of Critical Theory (alias the 'Frankfurt School') since the 1930ies.

29 See Alan Megill, *Prophets of extremity. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*, Berkeley 1985, 238: „He [Foucault] portrays discourse as something that goes out to do battle“.

30 Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality. Volume 1: An introduction*, New York 1980, 95: „Should we not turn the expression around, then, and say that politics is war pursued by other means?“

and power becomes an empty concept.³¹ If you remove freedom as the opposite of power, power simply ends up with no ‚other‘.³² If we cannot discriminate conceptually between making love and making war – and just state that all human relations are relations of power – then what can we say, except that in Foucault’s night of power all cats are indiscriminately grey?³³

The same argument applies to Foucault’s coupling of truth to power, i. e. his concept of ‚truth regime‘, which is nowadays used by some to discredit ‚academic‘ history altogether.³⁴ By denying the possibility of truthful representation on the part of ‚objective‘ science and by connecting truth at a conceptual level with power (‚power/knowledge‘), all science turns into ideology and all ideology turns into science. Foucault’s coupling of knowledge and power thus transforms both science and ideology into all-encompassing, and thus empty, categories. In the end, Newtonian science ends up in the same bag as Christian and proletarian ‚science‘ or even Scientology.³⁵

Thus, the basic argument against connecting truth conceptually to power is that it simply robs us of a distinction – between science and ideology – which most of us regard as valid and important. Significantly, this also holds true for

31 Ibidem, 93–94: „Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere“. „Power is not an institution, and not a structure, neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with: it is a name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society“. „Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter“. See also Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, as footnote 25, 187: „Between every point of the social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between everybody who knows and everyone who does not, there exist relations of power (...)“

32 On this point I agree again with Taylor, who argues that Foucault’s idea of power without a subject cannot be upheld. Foucault ends up with a kind of Schopenhauerian will to power, ungrounded in, and unrelated to, human action. See Taylor, *Foucault*, as footnote 24, 167 ff.

33 The fact that Foucault introduces the concept of resistance as an opposite to power does not alter the situation, because resistance too is only defined as a relational attribute of the ‚social body‘: just as power is everywhere, so is resistance. See Foucault, *Sexuality*, as footnote 30, 95: „These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.“ It is remarkable that Foucault’s analyses of power and politics ultimately converge with the ‚totalitarian‘ Marxian analyses he set out to criticize, because both suffer from the same ‚blind spot‘. Foucault is just as unable as Marxism to discriminate between democracy and dictatorship at a conceptual level. While ‚decentering‘ and ‚desubjectivising‘ power and shifting his focus from macro- to micro-‚technologies of power‘, his concept of politics remains as instrumental as the Marxist conceptions he criticizes. There is more left of Marx in Foucault than meets the eye.

34 See Jenkins, *Introduction*, as footnote 6, 13, who even accuses ‚academic‘ historians of ‚suppressing‘ alternative conceptions of history by ‚theoretical cleansing‘. On p. 20, *ibidem*, Jenkins asserts in the same vein that „normal history orders the past for the sake of the present and therefore power“.

35 Because Foucault does not restrict the scope of his power/knowledge theory to a specific domain (such as the human sciences), its claim to validity appears to be universal.

Foucault himself, who repeatedly referred to truth in a realistic sense.³⁶ To all appearances, even Foucault himself is inconsistent in coupling knowledge to power. What is meant by truth is simply independent of the constellation of power in which truth-claims are presented.

Whoever claims truth for a linguistic representation of reality (in any intelligible sense), basically claims that the linguistic representation somehow corresponds with reality.³⁷ Empirical truth-claims, therefore, have an existential character, which means they claim that a specific state of affairs exists in reality. Moreover, because existence implies existence for all and not just existence for some, truth-claims always claim a universal validity. Truth, therefore, always means truth for all and not only truth within a specific constellation of power: any claim to truth is universal by its very definition.

The fact that knowledge is produced in specific situations does not imply that the validity of claims to knowledge is relative to those situations. The latter (ethnocentric) idea is fundamentally misconceived and constitutes an untenable form of reductionism, in which the theory of knowledge is reduced to a sociology of knowledge. We can grasp this point most easily by applying

36 See the analysis of this problem in Bunzl, *Real history*, as footnote 8, 70–73, and the following statements in Michel Foucault, *Archeology of knowledge*, New York 1972, 90: „A sentence cannot be non-significant; it refers to something by virtue of the fact that it is a statement“, and 224: „It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void (...)“, and 218: „The division between true and false is neither arbitrary, nor modifiable, nor institutional, nor violent.“

37 Here we confront a fundamental problem with Foucault, because he rejects the common sense (correspondence) meaning of truth without substituting a more meaningful definition. His provisional specifications circumvent the ‚normal‘ problem of truth, since he refers to ‚statements‘ without addressing their representational adequacy and thus their truth. See Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, as footnote 25, 133: „‚Truth‘ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‚Truth‘ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‚regime‘ of truth“. In the end, his notion of truth remains as problematic as his notion of power. Also see Megill, *Prophets*, as footnote 29, 244: „We have already seen that Foucault views genealogy as directed against the notions of an ‚objective‘ reality, an ‚objective‘ identity, and an ‚objective‘ truth – for he sees these notions as confirming the existant order.“ (...) „One ‚fictions‘ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‚fictions‘ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth. This statement marks an odd interplay between truth and lie: a lying history is legitimized by the existence of a ‚true‘ political reality; a lying politics is legitimized by the existence of a ‚true‘ history. To expand on this: what makes ‚true‘ a representationally inadequate account of, for example, prisons, is the truth that we do live in a disciplinary society. In consequence, despite its inadequacies or even its outright falsehoods, such an account is justified insofar as it enables us to see more clearly the reality of this disciplinary society.“ One observes the conceptual connection in Foucault between his theory of (disciplinary) society and his theory of (power/)knowledge: disciplinary society functions as the observational basis of his theory of power/knowledge and therefore is beyond the possibility of empirical ‚refutation‘.

the power/knowledge theory to itself. According to Foucault's own theory, the validity of the power/knowledge theory is also limited to a particular truth regime, and cannot apply for other truth regimes without claiming universal validity and thus undermining itself. Therefore, we must draw the conclusion that Foucault's theory of power/knowledge does not offer a solid (a priori) argument against the possibility of 'objectivity' in history.³⁸

Postcolonial theory

Following Foucault's line of thought, postcolonial theorists and historians have developed original analyses of the postcolonial predicament. They have produced interesting discourse-analyses of the ways in which Westerners – especially Europeans – have constructed the 'non-West', thereby demonstrating the extent to which the 'non-West' has been a projection of the fears and desires of Westerners, or a simple reversal of Western self-images³⁹. Conceptual oppositions, such as civilisation and barbarism, maturity and childhood, development and underdevelopment, centre and periphery, and identity and difference/ alterity/ otherness, have therefore structured most studies in this field. Edward Said's book *Orientalism* has become the classic of this genre.

Postcolonial theorists have also embraced Foucault's power/knowledge theory by applying it to the study of the non-West. Foucault's critique of the Enlightenment tradition acquired a definite anti-European twist when postcolonial theory revealed that the universalism inherent in Enlightenment thought and modern science was an attempt by Western culture to gain hegemony and power over non-Western cultures and their knowledge resources. Particularist, 'local' knowledge was thus transformed into the opposite – 'the other' – of Western, universal knowledge. The task postcolonial theory has set itself is to 'provincialize Europe' and deconstruct the 'European project' in order to return to its repressed non-European alternatives.

Leela Ghandi states its case as follows, in her recent introduction to the subject: „Reason is the weapon of Enlightenment philosophy and, accordingly, the problem of anti-Enlightenment thought. Is it possible, after 10 November 1619 (the day Descartes dated the origin of his philosophy, CL), to imagine non-coercive knowledges? Is it possible (...) to think non-violently?“⁴⁰ „Postco-

38 However, see Jenkins, Introduction, as footnote 6, 15: „These questions in the end boil down to one: in whose interest is the particularistic history of the lower case (= ‚academic‘ history, CL) masquerading as universal?“

39 For a sound judgement regarding the sense and nonsense of discourse analysis on the basis of Asian studies, see esp. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung von Asien. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, München 1998, esp. 15–85.

40 Leela Ghandi, *Postcolonial theory. A critical introduction*, New York 1998, 37. Consisten-

lonial studies“, on the contrary, „claims that the entire field of the humanities is vitiated by a compulsion to claim a spurious universality and to disguise its political investment in the production of ‚major‘ or ‚dominant‘ knowledges“. ⁴¹ Postcolonial studies, by „revealing the [European, CL] interests which inhabit the production of knowledge“ at the same time tries to „recognise the epistemological valency of non-European thought“ ⁴². It does so by retrieving „the wide range of illegitimate, disqualified or subjugated knowledges“ that were marginalized and repressed by dominant – that is to say, Western – models of knowledge.

The marginalized and subjugated knowledges of the Non-West are thus presented as the ‚epistemological other‘ of Western science. According to postcolonial theory, these subjugated non-Western knowledges have been forcefully repressed by Western science until very recently, but are now returning under the aegis of postcolonial theory. ⁴³ In this way, according to Ghandi, the non-West may „think a way out of the epistemological violence of the colonial encounter“ ⁴⁴.

What we witness in Ghandi's treatise on postcolonial theory is Foucault's coupling of the production of (dominant) knowledge with particular interests, including specific relations of power, in a very pure and troubling form. We also see the distinction between dominant and repressed or marginalized knowledges, and we can observe the claim of a – particular and non-violent – epistemology to the latter domain.

Because I have already addressed the problems related to the conceptual connection between power and knowledge, and the issue of particularist epistemologies in relation to Foucault, I will not repeat those arguments again here. It will suffice to reiterate that claims to knowledge are universal by definition, so the basic idea of ‚local‘ epistemologies is incoherent. Whatever knowledge is produced in the non-West, is also valid in the West – and of course vice-versa. Once again, the conclusion is that Foucault's theory of power/knowledge does not offer a solid argument against the possibility of objectivity in history.

The problems of postcolonial theory on this score are attested by the paradoxical fact that some postcolonial theorists are using the platform of Western academia in order to reject Western rationality as an instrument of Western

cy is not one of Ghandi major fortes, as she tries to mobilize Habermas' theory of ‚knowledge interests‘ to back up the philosophical credentials of postcolonialism's critique of ideology. How Habermas, as one of the figure-heads of modern Enlightenment, can be claimed for an anti-Enlightenment project, remains a mystery. See *ibidem*, 53 and 62.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 52, 54.

⁴³ The ‚return of the repressed‘ is also a favourite train of thought in subaltern and postcolonial theory.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 63.

domination⁴⁵. In practice, they appear perfectly capable of transcending their original perspectives and cultural horizons – although this fact is contradicted by their ethnocentric theory. In a way, they share the predicament of our Indian eagle hunter from California, who used a U.S.-made machine-gun in order to protect his traditional Indian life-style and who did not reject ‚Western‘ U.S. technology while renouncing U.S. culture and U.S. law. Ethnocentrism, though stringent in theory, appears to be rather selective and self-defiant in practice – and is thus ultimately incoherent⁴⁶.

3. History, instrumentality and the legitimation of power

Until now, I have argued that the arguments often used by postmodernists to discredit the possibility of truth and objectivity in history are unfounded. Nevertheless, I do subscribe to their idea that historical knowledge fulfils important political and societal functions.

When we start analysing the practical functions of history, it is crucial to formulate the problem adequately, because discussion of this topic has often been rather confused. Traditionally, there have been strong correlations between conceptions of the practical functions of history and conceptions of objectivity. Defenders of the ideal of objectivity in history tended to play down its practical functions, and whoever defended history's practical functions, tended to play down its objectivity. A neat dividing line between the two camps, usually labelled as objectivism and relativism, was the result.

While objectivists claimed that history was only, or primarily, guided by the search for truth (‚wie es eigentlich gewesen‘), relativists claimed that history was at the same time conditioned by cultural, political and ideological influences and was therefore relative to specific milieux. In consequence, relativists were far more inclined than objectivists to argue that history fulfilled legitimizing and instrumental functions in politics and ideology. In this way, an opposition was created between a position that emphasized the cognitive drive of history and a position that downplayed its cognitive drive in favour of its practical functions. Peter Novick's recent prize-winning book on the history of

45 The inevitable question, „Which ‚interests‘ linger behind postcolonial theory?“ is answered by Ghandi – citing Said – as follows: „Its social goals are non-coercive knowledge in the interests of human freedom“. One recognizes the Marxist echoes of ‚the mission of the proletariat‘, but misses the ensuing discussion. Likewise, one recognizes the attempt to free postcolonial theory itself from the ‚unmoved mover‘ – i. e. Power – to which all other theories are subject. As stated before, however, it is very hard for relativists to remain consistent.

46 Cf. Bunzl's analysis of the inconsistencies of subaltern studies concerning ‚peasant consciousness‘ in Bunzl, Real history, as footnote 8, 80–83.

the ‚objectivity question‘ in the U.S., *That noble dream*, fits perfectly into this traditional conceptual grid.⁴⁷

The postmodern debate on history is, in fact, little more than a new chapter in this longstanding debate, because postmodernism has never broken with the traditional conceptualizations of the problem of ‚objectivity versus relativity‘. Postmodernism, with its denial of objectivity and its relativistic emphasis on ‚identity politics‘, is basically the classical relativist position in a new linguistic guise.⁴⁸ After my earlier critique of postmodern arguments against the possibility of ‚objective‘ history, it will come as no surprise that with regard to the instrumentality of history, I also think the postmodern argument contains a rational kernel, but has grossly overstated its case. Let me explain why.

As a starting point, I want to refer to Thomas Haskell, who has pointed out the crucial difference between objectivity and neutrality. Striving after objectivity is not at all the same as striving after neutrality, although the two issues have often been conflated. Objectivity is the collective result of respecting the methodological rules of the discipline, open-mindedness, detachment, mutual criticism and fairness. These conditions for objectivity are social and individual at the same time.⁴⁹

Striving after objectivity in this sense has nothing to do with neutrality and is even compatible with strong political commitments. It is no wonder, therefore, that many eminent historians have also been known for their ideological convictions. Relating ‚doing history‘ to issues of identity, as relativists and postmodernists often do, thus makes sense, but only on the condition that both are related in adequate ways. By adequate I mean that we have to acknowledge ‚identity-politics‘ in historical ‚knowledge production‘ without sacrificing the disciplinary status of history, which is based on its claim to truth and objectivity.

This is possible as soon as we recognize three things:

1. Historical representations always involve constructions of identity, knowingly or unknowingly. Every historian who writes a ‚history of Austria‘ or a ‚history of Canada‘ constructs at the same time a historical identity.
2. Because it is always feasible to develop various representations of the

47 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream*. The „Objectivity Question“ and the American Historical Profession, Cambridge 1988.

48 See Lorenz, *Historical knowledge*, as footnote 8, and Lorenz, *Konstruktion*, as footnote 2, chapter 14, for more elaborate arguments.

49 See Thomas Haskell, ‚Objectivity is not neutrality: Rhetoric versus practice in Peter Novick’s *That noble dream*‘, in: N. Fay et al. (eds.), *History and theory. Contemporary readings*, Cambridge 1998, 303; Herta Nagl-Docekal, *Die Objektivität der Geschichtswissenschaft. Systematische Untersuchungen zum wissenschaftlichen Status der Historie*, München 1982, 227–243; Jürgen Kocka, *Legende, Aufklärung und Objektivität in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Zu einer Streitschrift von Thomas Nipperdey*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 6 (1980), 449–455.

‘same’ history from different perspectives, it is always possible to make a choice in this regard. One could, for example, write a history of Austria or of Canada as ‘a state that was no nation and therefore became a federacy’ or as ‘a federal state that once mistook itself for a nation’. The same history of Austria or Canada can thus be represented from both a national and a federal perspective, thereby representing national and federal historical identities.⁵⁰

3. Historians’ choice of a guiding perspective is usually related to their own political ideals and their ‘identity-politics’. This choice is possible because of the reflexive character of historical identity. Human beings are what they are, partly on the basis of how they define themselves in historical narratives.⁵¹

This does not, of course, mean that the choice between different perspectives and narratives is free of empirical considerations, i. e. the evidence, or arbitrary, as some postmodernists suggest. It would, for example, be difficult, if not impossible, to construct the modern history of the Netherlands from a federal perspective. It only means that the choice of identity-perspective is not determined by the evidence, although it is restricted by the evidence. (Here too, there is a plurality because of the under-determination of historical representation by the evidence). Respect for the evidence and the methodological rules remains paramount as long as historical representations are presented as claims to knowledge with a universal validity. Instrumental history and legitimizing history differ from scientific history on precisely this point: whenever history is used in instrumental and legitimizing ways, history is made subservient to other goals at the expense of the supremacy of evidence and methods. Instrumental and legitimizing history have therefore acquired a bad reputation within the discipline as specimens of partisan history – and rightly so. To quote Eric Hobsbawm on this issue: „To insist on the supremacy of evidence, and the centrality of the distinction between verifiable historical fact and fiction, is only one of the ways of exercising the historian’s responsibility, and, as actual historical fabrication is not what it once was, perhaps not the most important. Reading the desires of the present into the past, or, in technical terms, anachronism, is the most common and convenient technique of creating a history satisfying the needs of what Benedict Anderson has called ‘imagined

50 See for Austria the special issue ‘Welches Oesterreich?’ of the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 7 (1996), nr. 4. For Canada see, for instance, Ramsay Cook, *Canada, Quebec and the uses of nationalism*, Toronto 1995, and the forum ‘Comparative historiography: problems and perspectives’, in: *History and Theory* 38 (1999), nr. 1, 25–100, esp. my introduction, 25–40.

51 See Lorenz, *Konstruktion*, as footnote 2, 400–437. Charles Taylor makes the same point. See Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the human sciences*, New York 1985, 9: „(...) the practices which make up a society require certain self-descriptions on the part of participants. These self-descriptions can be called constitutive“. „(...) language does not only serve to depict ourselves and the world, it also helps to constitute our lives“.

communities' or collectives, which are by no means only national ones."⁵² „ Historians, however microscopic, must be for universalism, not out of loyalty to an ideal to which many of us remain attached but because it is the necessary condition for understanding the history of humanity. For all human collectivities necessarily are and have been part of a larger and more complex world. A history which is designed only for Jews (or African-Americans, or Greeks, or women, or proletarians, or homosexuals) cannot be good history, though it may be comforting to those who practise it."⁵³ I could not have expressed the case for history any better or more clearly.

52 Eric Hobsbawm, *On history*, London 1997, 273. Evans' book, *In defence of history*, as footnote 1, was translated into German with the significant title ‚Fakten und Fiktionen‘, Frankfurt am Main 1998.

53 Ibidem, 277.